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AUTHOR Hustler, David; Carter, Karen; Halsall, Rob; Watts, Tony; Ball, Ben; Ward, Rob

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ABSTRACT

Development of career management skills in higher education (HE) was examined in a study of nine HE institutions in the United Kingdom. Despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of career management skills, consensus on the precise way such skills should be defined and related to core (key) skills was limited. Three strategies for delivery of career management skills were developed: delivery through specific generic or customized modules; integration within academic programs at the curriculum or personal level; and the extracurricular approach (delivery outside the curriculum via technology or noncredit special events). Methods of assessing students' mastery of career management skills at the HE institutions included the following: reflective essays or reports; learning logs, portfolios, and action plans; group or individual projects or presentations; direct assessment of resumes, applications, and interviews, and written examinations. Four models of dividing responsibilities for career management skills training among career services and teaching departments were identified: parallel delivery; career advisers acting as consultants who lent advice and support to academic staff; integrated delivery by joint course teams of academic staff and career advisers; and specialized delivery solely by career advisers. Many HE institutions involved employers and current and former students in career management skills training. (MN)

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Developing Career Management Skills in Higher Education

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Sheraton House, Castle Park, Cambridge CB3 0AX
Tel: 01223-460277 Fax: 01223-311708
E-mail: enquiries@crac.org.uk

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Changes in the graduate labour market mean that graduates need skills to manage their own lifelong careers. These skills are also needed more immediately by students to manage their learning and work in parallel, on and off campus. Developing such skills requires new linkages between careers services and the higher education curriculum.

This Briefing:

- examines alternative definitions of career management skills;
- explores the main delivery strategies;
- distinguishes the roles of careers services and teaching departments;
- discusses the roles of employers, of students, and of senior management;
- identifies factors which support or inhibit success.

The Briefing is based on a MMU/NICEC evaluation of a DfEE-funded development programme on Career Management Skills covering nine higher education institutions. It has been written by David Hustler, Karen Carter and Rob Halsall (MMU) and by Tony Watts, Ben Ball and Rob Ward (NICEC).

DEFINITIONS

The notion of integrating 'career' within the higher education curriculum is not new. In the 1980s, however, the term 'career management' was reserved almost exclusively to describe policies and practices used by large business organisations to develop the careers of middle and senior management. Careers services in higher education, by contrast, described their curriculum-related work as 'careers education' – borrowing the conceptual framework used in secondary education.

The adoption of the term 'career management skills' potentially re-frames such activity from broad objectives concerned with career awareness, to the explicit development of student skills for managing their careers.

The term was interpreted within the projects in different ways:

- In some cases, the main focus was on *immediate employment* (e.g. helping students to market themselves effectively); in others, on *sustained employability* ('lifelong career survival').
- In some cases, the main focus was on *career planning* (self-assessment, resource investigation, developing a realistic career plan, networking); others also incorporated *workplace effectiveness* (team working, negotiation skills, adaptability, flexibility).
- In some cases, the focus was mainly on meeting the *needs of employers*; in others, on a *critical awareness* of changes in the world of work.
- Some saw career management skills as a sub-set of *personal skills*; others as a set of *meta-skills* required to bring about the effective transfer of personal skills to other settings.

In general, there appeared to be widespread acknowledgement of the importance of career management skills, but only limited consensus on the precise way these skills should be defined and related to core/key skills.

THE PROJECTS

The DfEE-funded Career Management Skills development programme ran from 1996 to 1998. It included three Whole Institution Projects working across the whole of the institutions concerned:

University of Central Lancashire
University of Leeds
University of Manchester & UMIST

It also included five Specialist Projects, usually working on specific strategies or techniques:

Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education
University of Exeter
The London Institute
University of Nottingham
College of Ripon and York St John

DELIVERY STRATEGIES

Three delivery strategies were developed:

- Through specific modules.
- Through more general curriculum integration.
- Outside the curriculum.

THE MODULE APPROACH

Modules represent a relatively straightforward approach since they fall within the mainstream funding of course provision and avoid any need to 're-jig' the rest of an award programme.

There are two kinds of modular approach:

- *Generic*, where the same module is designed to be available to students in any department or course.
- *Customised*, where a generic template is adapted to the needs of particular departments or courses.

The generic strategy needs more limited development time and can be rooted very directly in established notions of what career management skills constitute. The customised strategy tends to lead to more active involvement of academic staff.

The module approach raises in stark form the perceived status or 'standing' of career management modules, in the eyes of both academic staff and students. There is a danger of it leading to marginalisation of career management skills, with no organic linkages being established with the rest of the student's programme. This is especially the case with generic modules: departments or degree schemes can employ degree regulations, income ring-fencing and partial advice to make it difficult for students to choose modules outside their departments or subject areas. Since in most cases the modules have optional status, the risk of a strategy based solely on the module approach is that no benefits may materialise for many students.

THE INTEGRATED APPROACH

Career management skills can be integrated within programmes by linking them to existing course components, so that the career management skills are 'caught' rather than 'taught'. This may be done on an *opportunistic* basis. Alternatively, it can be done on a *systematic* basis, e.g. as part of a 'module template' providing greater transparency for the skills (including career management skills) embedded within each module.

A further option is to support integration at a personal level, through mechanisms such as learning logs. One project developed an assessed Career Learning Log which involved students in recording and reflecting upon career management learning not only from specific sessions, but also from other aspects of their course, and indeed from other aspects of their life.

THE EXTRA-CURRICULAR APPROACH

Delivery outside the curriculum took two forms:

- Via *technology* – through e.g. computer-assisted learning programmes on CD-ROM, or through the creation and enhancement of websites.
- Via non-credit-bearing *special events* – e.g. careers fairs, one-off sessions on particular skills (e.g. self-presentation), or short residential courses.

Technology provides an opportunity to (in rugby parlance) 'go round the blind side, straight to the students', so avoiding possible resistance from academic staff. It is also seen as being 'in tune' with current student learning styles, and offering support that is independent of time and place. It provides a curriculum resource, but is not dependent on curriculum use.

Issues relating to the use of technology include the long development time, the cost of updating, and securing continued funding and clear responsibilities for such updating. Extra-curricular approaches make less demands on the institution, but may be more difficult to sustain.

TIMING

There is a tension between the staff interest in helping students develop their career thinking at an early stage and the tendency of students not to perceive their need for such support until they are close to graduation. A stronger focus at earlier stages on helping students to manage their learning and work during their time in higher education could help to reconcile this tension.

ASSESSMENT

A key issue, particularly for approaches based on incorporating career management skills into the curriculum, is how student performance is to be assessed. All projects encouraged an element of student self-assessment in the process of reviewing skills and competencies. But progress towards formal, tutor-led assessment of students' career management skills proved more of a challenge. There was a widely-held view in the projects that students would give greater credence to provision related to career management skills if they were subject to such assessment.

Assessment methods adopted included:

- Reflective essays or reports.
- Learning logs and portfolios, including action plans.
- Group or individual projects.
- Group or individual presentations.
- Direct assessment of CVs, applications and interviews.
- Written examinations.

Assessment was largely tutor-led; employers and fellow-students provided feedback, but in general this had little or no direct bearing on formal assignment of grades or marks. By the nature of the methods adopted, assessment was largely concerned with students' ability to reflect on and amass evidence for the development of skills, rather than on assessment of skill performance *per se*.

Some staff and students found some of the assessment methods (e.g. learning logs and portfolios) unfamiliar. Assessment in skills and competencies tended to be more familiar in vocationally-oriented courses than in courses with a traditional academic orientation (e.g. humanities); it also tended to be more easily accomplished in degree programmes in which the pattern of assessment was weighted in favour of continuous assessment.

Some students were concerned about the issue of privacy in completing self-appraisal materials which were to be assessed by tutors – particularly divulging personal values and beliefs.

Skills assessed included:

- Self-appraisal, reflection and analysis.
- Information search.
- Skills identification.
- Team working.
- Formulating proposals.
- Making presentations.
- Self-presentation (applications, CV, interviews).

Some assessments focused directly on the skills developed within a particular module; in other cases, there was a recognition that the assessment covered skills that might be developed in various parts of a course.

Issues relating to assessment included:

- Reconciling assessment demands for objectivity with the subjective nature of career management skills.
- The risk that assessment will focus on comparatively simple skills (e.g. CV writing) rather than on the more complex tasks of making career decisions, finding and utilising mentors, or defining development needs.
- The extent to which careers advisers and employers should be involved in assessment, and how such involvement is to be managed.

ROLES OF CAREERS SERVICES AND TEACHING DEPARTMENTS

The relative roles of the careers service and of teaching departments varied. Models included:

- *Parallel delivery*: academic staff and careers advisers have separate slots in a departmentally-based programme, usually initiated and owned by the department.
- *Consultancy*: careers advisers lend support and expertise to work undertaken by departments, including involvement in planning groups, materials development and informal staff development.
- *Integrated*: academic staff and careers advisers work as a joint course team.
- *Specialist*: delivered solely by careers advisers.

ATTITUDES OF ACADEMIC STAFF

Most projects started by working with a limited number of teaching departments that had volunteered their interest. No consistent pattern was evident across the projects:

- In some, vocational areas seemed predominantly positive and non-vocational areas (e.g. humanities) much less so.
- In others, the reverse was the case: take-up was greater in departments concerned that their students had little sense of career direction or knowledge of the job market; whereas vocational areas saw little need to be involved because of their extensive employer links, their specialist knowledge of the job market, and their view that students' career paths were well-defined.

Within departments, there were differing views. Some academic staff felt that higher education was not concerned with preparation for employment. Such staff were more likely to be impressed by references to the impact of skill development on academic work than to enhancing employability.

Other staff resisted work on career management skills on the grounds that it would have a diluting effect on students' degree experience because it would not operate at the necessary 'level'. This was linked to concerns about the subjectivity of such skills, and the difficulties experienced in assessing them. In some cases, gaining the approval of course validation groups proved particularly problematic.

Much depended on having a 'champion': a head of department, course leader or head of scheme with a personal and professional interest in the project's concerns. Also important were 'link persons': staff within departments who were keen to be involved at operational level. There was evidence in some departments of more staff being 'won over' during the course of the projects.

INVOLVEMENT OF ACADEMIC STAFF

Some academic staff accepted the desirability of career management skills, but felt it to be outside their areas of expertise. Some also resisted involvement on the grounds of the pressures on their time, and lack of attention to skills work in the academic reward structure. Such staff looked to careers-service staff to take responsibility for delivery.

Other staff, however, were keen to take more active responsibility themselves, and to link career management skills more closely to the mainstream academic work of the department. For some, this was merely an extension of their existing work; but others had to learn new methods of teaching and of assessment, with a stronger focus on skills rather than knowledge. Academic staff development was accordingly a major perceived need in some of the projects. Possibilities included:

- Awareness-raising sessions.
- Workshops and learning packs on teaching and learning issues (different learning styles, managing small-group learning, etc.), on career management skills, and on related assessment issues.
- E-mail hotlines to consultants able to provide advice on problems/issues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREERS ADVISERS

The projects have brought careers services closer to the curriculum, with involvement in planning, developing and delivering courses and learning materials. In many cases there has been a move away from a dominant concern with one-to-one guidance towards a more clearly defined role in teaching and learning. This has moved the careers service away from the periphery and towards the 'heart' of the institution.

The new role has posed challenges, notably in relation to assessment of students:

- Because of their lack of experience in this area, careers advisers have struggled with the structures and procedures inherent in some assessment systems, and have found it absorbing more time than anticipated.
- Some careers advisers have experienced role conflict, feeling that assessing students has compromised their otherwise 'non-judgemental' stance in counselling and guiding students.

More broadly, the new role has required involvement not just in teaching but in academic management: examination boards, teaching and learning committees, etc. It means that in addition to their traditional employer links, careers advisers have to give considerable attention to building and maintaining links with academic staff and with the institution's senior managers responsible for academic concerns. It also means acting in staff-development and 'change-agent' roles, sometimes as part of strategic alliances with existing academic-support units.

All this demands new skills, with implications for the professional development of careers-service staff. It can also involve such staff experiencing 'role ambiguity' or 'role overload'. In some projects it resulted in key careers-service staff being located outside the careers service in 'academic leadership' roles, with curriculum development the main focus of their work.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREERS SERVICES

Such changes have implications for the structural position of the careers service within institutions. Possibilities include:

- The careers service becoming, or existing alongside, a teaching unit focusing on career management as an academic discipline in which research can be conducted.
- Restructuring the careers service as an academic service rather than a student service.
- Providing curriculum consultancy and support within the traditional careers-service model, alongside its information, guidance and placement functions.

Much depends on the existing role and resource level of the careers service: this varies considerably between institutions. It is also linked to curriculum resource issues: the extent to which the careers service should generate income from its teaching activities on the same basis as (and therefore potentially in competition with) teaching departments, or be funded for such activities from central resources. The income-generation model in principle offers greater growth potential.

INVOLVING EMPLOYERS

Employers have been closely involved in the work of the projects, not only as members of project steering groups, but also:

- in planning and development – e.g. making contributions to the definition of career management skills, to the production of course materials (including computer-aided learning packages and CD-ROMs), to staff-development programmes, and – on occasion – to course design;
- in making direct contributions to course delivery – e.g. providing workshops, lectures and seminars, and acting as hosts for project work and placements.

Involvement was particularly strong in activities related to recruitment and selection (e.g. interview simulations, application/CV analysis) and in team-building and problem-solving tasks. Such involvement added considerably to the relevance and realism of these activities, and their credibility to students.

Employers' motivations for involvement included:

- Conveying a positive image of their organisation.
- Access to prospective applicants.
- Company policies encouraging community involvement.

Employer contributions came mainly from large traditional recruiters of graduates. Difficulties were experienced in involving small and medium-sized employers. There were risks, therefore, of over-using supportive employers, and of programmes reflecting only part of the graduate labour market.

There was also a tendency for employers to be more prepared to involve themselves with vocationally-oriented courses and/or in higher-status institutions. Even where this was not the case, there was a perceived tension between large employers' avowed concern for skills and their continued tendency to target the older universities for recruitment.

INVOLVING STUDENTS

Some projects have benefited from bottom-up pressure from those students who appeared to be more aware than others of the demise of the "job for life" and who had positive attitudes to the notion of career and to industry and commerce. This pressure tended however to be stronger from students towards the end of their courses.

Involvement of students has varied from a traditional notion of students as recipients of courses planned by staff, to more active forms of participation. The latter has included:

- Using student feedback in designing programmes.
- Systematic consultation of students, through surveys or focus-group discussions, as part of project evaluation strategies.
- Contacting former career management module students after graduation and involving them in the delivery of modules to current students.

Some students have experienced the strong element of consultation as being a marked departure from their general experience of higher education. They feel that they have had "more of a say" in the teaching and learning relationship, and greater ownership of their learning. In some cases they have actively championed the extension of career management skills programmes in the curriculum.

Some careers services have also engaged in activities planned jointly with student societies, so by-passing the formal teaching structure. These have included:

- Presentations and workshops for student societies.
- Formal links with student society committees.
- Liaison with the Student Action Committee.

MANAGEMENT ATTITUDES

The support of senior managers within institutions is critical if the development of career management skills is to be given significant attention in higher education. Factors that were significant in influencing the extent of such support included:

- External pressures – e.g. the Dearing Inquiry and subsequent responses, Higher Education Funding Council subject and programme reviews, Teaching Quality Assessments, published league tables on graduate employment.
- Internal drivers – e.g. student demand, alignment with institutional mission.

External pressures could be positive (e.g. concern for graduate employability) or negative (e.g. emphasis on traditional academic standards; quest for higher research ratings). Potential institutional benefits included:

- Enhancing the institution's graduate employment record.
- Meeting the demands of Teaching Quality Assessments.
- Providing a useful marketing message to potential students.
- Building stronger employer links.

Support from senior management was at different levels:

- *Lukewarm*, with "lip service" being paid by managers for whom the project's concerns were far from being a priority but who welcomed its visibility and its "success" as a bid for external funds.
- *Highly positive*, with career-related concerns being reflected in institutional missions and strategic objectives, and in activities across a broad front.
- *In transition*: moving from lukewarm towards highly positive, sometimes linked with the arrival of new senior managers.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Factors *supporting* success included:

- Prior involvement in projects or institutional initiatives related to careers education or to teaching and learning more generally.
- "Academic empathy" within careers services, including willingness to cast methods of delivery explicitly and transparently in the context and culture of the department or discipline.
- Bottom-up pressure from students.
- Senior management support.
- Being viewed as contributing to other institutional agendas.
- Development at an early stage of continuation/embedding strategies involving academic credit.
- Strong employer involvement.
- The personal and professional qualities of the project staff.

Factors *inhibiting* success included:

- Competing institutional agendas, notably the research imperative.
- The continuing move towards budgetary devolution and the creation of internal cost centres.
- Lack of interest by departments outside the "committed core".
- Inflexibilities within modular systems.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The report summarised in this Briefing is published as:

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